WHO IS WORTHY?

June 1, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." --Luke 7:6b (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 7:1-10

In the popular biography of Pope John XXIII, there is a poignant description of his first public appearance after his election. Thousands of people were crowded into the great piazza of St. Peter's to see the new Pope. "They watched as a huge tapestry was unfurled over the edge of the balcony. It was the coat of arms of Pius XII. They saw windows thrown open on either side of the balcony and groups of Cardinals, having just come from the Sistine Chapel, standing and watching too. Now bugles...cut through the murmuring night...almost unexpectedly he was there, a solid, thickset figure in white. Other Popes had been born in portable thrones amid the full splendor of the Vatican Court. John XXIII came alone and on foot and he stood there so still and unassuming that seconds passed before most of those below were aware of what had happened." [I Will Be Called John, Lawrence Elliot, pp. 8-9]

It was the first of many refreshingly humble gestures by a man people thought was to be an interim caretaker, but who became one of the most disarmingly winsome and influential persons in the Twentieth Century. The Roman Church is a different institution today because of him. And, in many ways, he was the most influential Roman Catholic leader - for Protestantism, since the Reformation. The Protestant establishment is different because of John XXIII. His gift and his extraordinary influence derived, in part, from the humility of his perspective. He was not enarmoured with the trappings of his office. He expressed a sense of unworthiness with some regularity, often with a wry sense of humor. For instance over the centuries the custom had evolved of genuflecting three times in the presence of the Pope. When one of his aides who was also a close friend did it, Pope John asked him not to. His friend protested that the gesture was deeply a part of him and the Pope said, "Very well, but once is enough. Don't you think I believe you the first time?" [p. 251] Norman Cousins recalls the Pope's opening remark when they were together for an interview. "Just remember, I'm an ordinary man: I have two eyes, a nose - a very large nose... You must feel completely relaxed." [p. 297]

The papacy of John XXIII was graced by his own sense that whatever the regal trappings of the office were about they had nothing to do with his own worthiness. It was that sense of perspective, that authentic and honest humility that made him, in the eyes of millions of people, Roman Catholic, Protestant and non-Christian alike, somehow worthy of his high office. Acknowledging his unworthiness - tapped into something in the hearts of millions of people who knew what unworthiness feels like.

Religion is very interested in the matter of human unworthiness. Our entree to the topic is ordinarily our sensitivity to sin. We are good at telling people why they are unworthy, inadequate, guilty, damned. Our interest, further, in the topic, takes the form of a modest proposal that religion itself is the remedy for unworthiness: engage in the prescribed rituals and rubrics, repeat the proper formulas, believe the right stuff and you will be suddenly saved, not guilty, worthy. And sometimes - happily - but not frequently, religion announces that on the topic of human unworthiness there is a word from the Lord. It is not always perceived as a religious word. The word from God on the subject is Grace.

But, first, let's look again at an incident in Luke's Gospel which presents the issue...

It is a story of a remarkable soldier, a Roman Centurion, stationed in Capernaum, assigned to the puppet King Herod Antipas. Centurions were the backbone of Rome's occupying army. They were the equivalent of modern non-commissioned officers, career men. They were good at their work - which involved commanding 100 men, keeping the peace and maintaining order. That was neither romantic nor easy in Capernaum. There was no love lost between Jews and the Roman army of occupation. To the Romans, the Jews seemed fanatically nationalistic, going on and on about how the land was theirs because God had given it to them. Revolts were common-place. In addition, their religion was peculiar and rigid and exclusive.

Many Roman soldiers detested the Jews. Sometimes they intentionally violated religious custom, like the time they carried the Roman Eagle into the Temple Courtyard.

The Centurion in Luke's story did not fit this stereotype. It's hard not to like him. Apparently he had grown to appreciate the religion of the people of Capernaum. When the village needed a new Synagogue, he raised the money for it. The residents liked him. He liked them. The incident in Luke's Gospel is about this soldier's concern for one of his house servants, a slave actually, who was critically ill.

In Capernaum there lived another man, a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, whose reputation as a teacher and a healer was spreading throughout Galilee. People were talking about him. One time, when he was returning to Capernaum he was met by a delegation of his neighbors, who had come on behalf of the Centurion, to ask Jesus to heal the critically ill servant. "The man is worthy" they said, meaning of course, the Centurion. He has paid his dues. He is a decent human being. He deserves this consideration. So Jesus headed for the Centurion's home, but was intercepted by another delegation, this one from the Centurion, hearing a

different message. "Don't come. Don't trouble yourself. I am not worthy to have you under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed." He had remembered that it was not legal for Jesus, a Jew, to enter a Gentile's home. He, the Centurion, was not worthy - racially, religiously.

Now something in that impressed Jesus very much. Almost everybvody agrees that Jesus was taken by the Centurion's utter confidence that the healing could be affected from a distance. "Not even in Israel have I found such faith," he said. The more I think about it, however, the more I want to entertain the possibility that Jesus was astounded with "I am not worthy to have you under my roof." That was unusual. The whole weight of social custom and religion, after all, was on the other side of the equation.

The purpose of religion, it seemed, was to make people feel worthy, deserving of God's attention.

Religion deals with it because our sense of worth - worthfulness - is a deeply human dilemma. The psychologists keep telling us that we human beings have a very difficult time feeling good about ourselves.

Dr. Thomas Harris, Psychiatrist and author, writes: "I believe the universal problem is that by nature every small infant, regardless of what culture he was born into, because of his situation, decides on the position, 'I'm not OK.'" That, Harris concludes, is the most important fact about us. We believe we are unworthy and we spend the rest of our lives trying desparately to convince others, but mostly ourselves, that we are worthy - or OK. He has a lot of support for that position.

Classically, religion has presented itself as the way an individual can be "put right with God," feel worthy or OK about himself or herself. Paul Tournier suggests that it is a matter of basic economics. Do good things and God will love you. Religion is the way one accumulates worth. First century Judaism was guilty of that, but no more so than religion in every age.

Now once you make the assumption that your religion confers worthiness on you, it is almost inevitable that two new dynamics go to work. First, it is really impossible not to conclude that your neighbor who doesn't share your inside position because of your religion, isn't going to hell. Second, once religion understands its own power, know that people have trusted it to deal with their most critical psychological - spiritual problems - i.e. how to feel worthy about themselves or right with God or saved, it is almost impossible for religion not to work with that a little bit, get a little mileage from it; raise a little money for instance, on the outside chance that it might enhance one's position with God.

I believe Luke uses the story of the Centurion to propose an entirely different way of thinking about this matter. I don't believe the critically ill servant is the main point at all. He's not unimportant, but I believe the focus is the soul of this Roman military man, far away from home but trying to be civil, and the souls of the religious elders trying

so desparately to get right with God by obeying all the rules.

I think Luke's point is that everybody is a little bit wrong in this incident, but wrong enough to miss the very good news which is Jesus Christ. The Jewish friends of the Centurion were wrong when they proposed that he deserved the attention of Jesus because he had been generous. And the Centurion was wrong when he announced that he was not worthy of Jesus' attention, on the basis of his race or religion. The radical and new word Luke is straining to express here is that no one is worthy of God's grace - you get it anyway. Worthiness is not part of this equation. The new word - the good word is Grace - God's unconditional love for people which is based, not on their worthiness, but on God, God's love.

There are two magnificent ideas which thread their way through Luke's Gospel, often conveyed by outsiders - Shepherds, Samaritans, Roman soldiers. The first is reconciliation - that the coming of Jesus Christ is God's way of breaking down all the human barriers that separate people - race, nationality, sex, religion. The second is the universality of God's love. No one is outside it. God intends his love to be experienced by the whole world, not just a select few.

It's no accident that Luke tells us about a Christ whose compassion knows no boundaries, who is moved by human suffering whenever he encounters it. Luke wants us to remember the compassion of Christ which is triggered by the outsiders - the nameless slave of a Centurion, for instance.

That is still radical: some would say naive. Everyone knows you have to be careful in this world. There are people out there who are dishonest; people who don't even try to work, people who have made an art-form out of bilking the welfare agencies and soft-headed do-gooders. The simple mandate of the Gospel, however, is that love is not connected to worthiness. If it is, we are all in trouble. People are to be helped, not on the basis of merit, but because they are in need. And if loving them is more than we can manage, we are called to help them so that God's love has a channel to heal and restore and reclaim.

When Dick Shepherd assumed the Vicarate of St. Martin's in the Fields the parish was dying. He began with the poor around the church and scandalized proper Angelicans by announcing that "You can't preach Christ to empty bellies." If you have visited Trafalgar Square in London you know that today St. Martin's is open day and night, a center for concerts and poetry and ministries of service and a haven for anyone who needs a haven. One hundred thousand people came to celebrate his life and ministry when Shepherd died. One of them was a little boy who paid Shepherd this ultimate tribute. Told to remove his cap when he entered the church, he said: "This ain't a church. This is St. Martin's." How sad, how utterly tragic - when church means you have to be somebody to go inside. How limiting and how tragic when we are convinced that our love should go only to those we judge to be worthy. As if love ever had anything to do with worth.

If you have ever been in love you know what that means. To know yourself loved wholly and honestly and strongly by another human being is to be humbled by the wonder and unlikeliness of it. To be loved is to

ask on occasion: "How is this possible? How can she love me so?" To be loved is to know, experientially, the reality of grace = a love that, thank God, does not depend on my lovability but on some miracelous strength in the other person.

The problem in religion and in love, of course, is pride, that original sin of ours, that compulsion in each of us which begins at that place deep inside where we do not feel worthy, and then sets us on a life-time of scrambling and working to establish our worthiness. The problem is that we come to believe that we are getting it done - that we do deserve God's love, have earned it - have become worthy of whatever we get in this world of love, affection, appreciation. That thinking and that dynamic gets between us and those we want to love and ultimately it gets between God and ourselves. We know it, I believe, at the intimate center of our own lives. We know, in social relationships, how difficult it is to maintain friendship with someone who is utterly self sufficient, who needs nothing from us, who is worthy. In intimate relationships we know how deadly it is when love becomes the price we negotiate for services rendered: when we feel that the other is obligated to love us, that we deserve it, and when there is no longer any wonder at the grace of it all. It is difficult to penetrate the veneer of the self-sufficient, the self-satisfied, the worthy.

Those of us who are parents know that the best love we have for our children does not depend on their performance, but the love which comes welling up out of our own hearts. We know that it is not unusual or particularly noble to love a lovable child. And we know that real, healing love is called out of us precisely when a child is obnoxious.

The miracle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the radical mandate of Christian discipleship is this: none of us is worthy of what God has done for us in Christ, and our unworthiness is not the point. The point is God's unconditional love.

It is finally very personal for each of us. Frederick Buechner has a wonderful paragraph in which he writes that "most theology like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Acquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, worked out their systems - And if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face... smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once. Maybe no more than a thunderstorm, a dream, and yet it made a difference...which no theology can ever entirely convey or entirely conceal." [Alphabet of Grace.]

It is suggested that somewhere in the history of each of us we conclude that we are not worthy. If theology is autobiography, many of us have spent a life-time trying to find a way to resolve or at least live with that conviction in our hearts - we are not worthy.

We have thought together about the story of a man, a Roman soldier, who had come to the same conclusion.

And if we have been listening, we have heard - out of that shared history of unworthiness, inadequacy, guilt - a word of grace. We have

recalled the Lord who healed the servant and loved the Centurion and in loving him saved his soul. And if we listen we will hear a word of Grace for ourselves: a word of unconditional love from a God - who, we know, in moments of occasional clarity - has loved us and saved us, too.

We come, at his bidding, to table: to remember that love: to celebrate it, to share it with one another and with the whole world. The table, in our tradition, is open. There are no theological tests, no moral barriers: no criteria of worthiness. What there is here is Grace.

Hear again the traditional words of invitation...

"Dearly beloved, all that humbly put their trust in Christ, and desire his help that they may lead a holy life, all that are truly sorry for their sins and would be delivered from the burden of them, are invited and encouraged in His name to come to this Sacrament. Let us, therefore, so come that we may find refreshing and rest unto our souls." Amen.